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ABSTRACT

Perspectives concerning the current disenchantment about undergraduate curricula and the bachelors degree are offered in this keynote address. It is suggested that rising expectations and unfulfilled hopes for higher education from the 1960s may be a factor. In the 1960s a sense of reform and rediscovery later created an expectation among students and faculty of something radically different. On the other hand, some have felt that much of the 1960s' reform was temporary and that curricula would return to "normal" after the student protest period. Disenchantment may also result from the passive response to student demand for certain professional baccalaureate curricula (e.g., business administration). Another factor may be the relatively poor general understanding of the process of curricular change. Some falsely assume that because course headings remain about the same, course content does also. Finally, there tends to be a failure to stress positive trends, including increased curricular offerings, greater scrutiny of degree programs, and rigorous admission/graduation requirements. It is suggested that major reports on issues in higher education be distributed on campuses. Suggestions concerning freshmen seminars, senior exams, and achieving a balance between undergraduate liberal and professional studies are also offered. (SW)

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CURRICULUM CONTENT AND CHANGE IN THE 1980s

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This paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Palmer House Hotel in Chicago, Illinois, March 15-17, 1985. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

Robert M. O'Neil

Association for the Study of Higher Education
Chicago, Illinois
March 15, 1985

Some months ago Bob Birnbaum called to ask if I might join with you at your annual meeting and offer some thoughts on a timely topic. That I was happy to do on a date and at a time which required a bit of negotiation. The topic then remained to be resolved. I had several thoughts and Bob had others; in the end he said "why not settle for something modest and limited in scope like 'Curriculum, Content and Change in the 1980s.'" With an offer like that, I could hardly refuse; my disclaimer of cosmic insight was of no avail and the topic remains as you now see it in the program.

We have heard a good deal in recent months about the baccalaureate curriculum and its alleged incoherence, devaluation, disarray and even worse. Roughly a month ago the report of the AAC committee drew headline comments (and not only in the Chronicle) for at least the third time since October. At no period that I can recall has there been such ferment (some might say torment) over the condition of the collegiate curriculum.

Actually the ferment predates last fall's release of the NIE and NEH reports. My own association with the Carnegie Foundation makes me anxious to recall an earlier study of general education by Ernie Boyer and Art Levine under the title A Quest for Common Learning. It was that study you may recall which used the intriguing analogy of the house with many rooms in which general education had become the "spare room" -- a part of the academic house "chronically in a state ranging from casual neglect to serious disrepair." Despite the

rather severe indictment which this report made of the baccalaureate curriculum and particularly of its general education component -- and despite, I may say, the many thousands of copies ordered by administrators and faculties across the country -- relatively little serious discussion occurred between that time and the publication last fall of the first of the recent spate of new indictments. I mention the CFAT report simply as evidence that the problems that have been addressed and readdressed in recent months had not been wholly unnoticed in the preceding period.

One might begin by summarizing the content of the latest reports -- something I forbear to do in the belief that most of you are at least as familiar with those contents as I and in many cases doubtless more so. Moreover, I suspect next week's program will have quite enough to say on that subject and needs no further attention from me at this stage. Instead, I would propose a somewhat different perspective which I hope may contribute more and may invite some discussion. My question is why the current disenchantment about the undergraduate curriculum and the baccalaureate degree has emerged with such speed and intensity. Each of us, I suspect, might venture views of his or her own; my speculations are not necessarily any better than anyone else's. For what they are worth, however, let me offer them in the hope that rebuttal or refutation may follow.

First, I suspect we may be suffering increasingly a combination of unfulfilled hopes and rising expectations from earlier periods in higher education. The recent reports have taken me back, for example, to many hours which I spent as a Berkeley faculty member during the mid-1960s in discussion and implementation of the

Muscatine Report. That document, you may recall, was the Berkeley faculty's most immediate and substantial response to the student upheaval of 1964 and early '65. A faculty senate committee labored through the summer and fall of '65 and produced a broad set of proposals for redefining the undergraduate experience. From the Academic Senate deliberations which followed, there emerged at least the Experimental College -- somewhat short lived and ill-fated (more for political than academic reasons) but well remembered by some students and most faculty of the period. (Quite recently we had in Madison a reunion of Wisconsin alumni who 50 years earlier had taken part in the experimental program founded by Alexander Meiklejohn. Joe Tussman, who directed Berkeley's experiment in the '60s, was among the returning Wisconsin Meiklejohn alumni. His reflections and those of others on the perils as well as the potential of the Experimental College were fascinating to those of us who knew the Meiklejohn era only as ancient history.)

What happened at Berkeley had parallels in many faculties across the country. There was in the '60s a sense of reform, of rediscovery and of renewal which undoubtedly created in the '70s and beyond an expectation of something radically different and more appealing to college undergraduates as well as to faculties. (Harvard's revamping of its general education offered somewhat later evidence of that hope. As one who went through Harvard College while the ink was still drying on the "Red Book" general education document of the late '40s, I viewed "General Education Redux" as a splendid opportunity to build upon earlier experience and take bold new steps. When the resulting report turned out to be (if anything) less venturesome than

its predecessor, many in Cambridge and elsewhere were deeply disappointed. In retrospect, I must say the hopes we had were probably unrealistic and much of the criticism of the resulting plans probably unwarranted. Nonetheless, there were hopes and aspirations that clearly were not fulfilled.)

There is a related and somewhat ironic feature which particularly intrigues me. Somehow there seems to have been abroad in the academic community an expectation that much of the "reform" of the '60s was understood as temporary and that when student protest abated curricula would return to something called "normal." To the degree that such return did occur, faculties have been accused of being reactionary or unimaginative and to the degree the reforms remained in place beyond the crisis which occasioned them, faculties are accused of laxity or abdication in academic standards. The situation created by curricular change in the '60s and early '70s thus seems to me an insoluble dilemma -- a situation in which one is damned for returning to the status quo and equally damned for making the temporary reforms permanent. To state the dilemma does not, of course, provide insight on the solution -- but may offer small solace as we contemplate the causes of our current condition.

Let me offer a second and utterly different explanation. We as university faculties have been quite passive in response to rapidly and steadily rising student demand for certain professional baccalaureate curricula. The explosion in business school enrollments is but the most visible and obvious example. It is not only the state universities which rolled rather uncritically on the tide of student and employer demand; far more serious is the evidence

that some private liberal arts colleges have offered to growing shares of their undergraduates a "closet" business degree under such rubrics as "applied economics" and the like. Indeed, I suspect much of the current dissatisfaction with undergraduate curricula results from the distortion imposed by rapid growth in student professional interests and degree demands.

It is less clear to me as a reader of the report what our faculties and academic administrators ought to have done when the tide began coming in. Some institutions, of course (and I believe wisely), either got completely out of undergraduate business education (like Northwestern and UCLA) or followed the University of Michigan and several others in limiting sharply the number of undergraduates admitted to business programs. Such steps would ideally have postponed business study to the graduate level like law, medicine and other learned professions. In fact, however, I suspect all they accomplished was sending students elsewhere -- from UCLA to Berkeley, from Northwestern to Penn, or from Michigan to Indiana (and of course Wisconsin) where the gates remained essentially open for all who sought an immediately employable baccalaureate degree. Yet the academic community as a whole is rightly faulted for not having anticipated the distorting effect of such student demand and not having planned more carefully for these consequences. Here I think the criticism is well taken and the cause not hard to find.

A third factor may be the relatively poor general understanding of the process of curricular change. When course headings remain roughly the same, most people who read university catalogs assume that what is taught under that heading remains rigid and frozen over

time. Of course, we know that is not the case. (I vividly recall a discussion some months ago with a member of our Board of Regents who had graduated from the University's Law School about 30 years ago. He suggested that little had happened in changing curricula, since the catalog read very much as it did when he was a student. I reviewed with him the subject of constitutional law which I had taught both then and now. "I suppose you think we still devote half the course to state taxation and state regulation of interstate commerce," I observed. He nodded vigorously. I then corrected his impression by pointing out that subjects which did indeed occupy nearly half the course when I began teaching are now disposed of in a few hours at most. The course is still called constitutional law, and the content of the one paragraph description in the bulletin is virtually the same as it was a quarter century ago, but the resemblance stops there. In fact, the burgeoning Supreme Court docket of civil rights and civil liberties cases has effected profound change in what we actually teach. The same is equally true in fields such as property law -- where in my time as a student we learned about the transfer of Blackacre from one feudal manor to another but where today virtually the entire course addresses modern problems of land use, zoning, planning, urban development and the like. It's still called "property" but there is little further resemblance to a course of the same name in the 1950s.)

The point is that we know how, when and why curriculum changes -- and we realize a large part of that change occurs under traditional and familiar headings. Yet the impression of a static, rigid or frozen and unresponsive baccalaureate curriculum is altogether

plausible. Somehow we have simply failed to explain even to our students, our governing boards, our alumni and perhaps even to our colleagues how curricular change and evolution actually do occur. Much of our current plight can, I think, be traced to that source.

Finally, I would suggest that we have been derelict in failing to stress some very salutary and positive trends. Let me mention several which occur as potential but largely unheralded antidotes. Despite the claimed rigidity and specialization within and among traditional disciplines, there has also been unprecedented growth in area studies, in interdisciplinary majors and in other baccalaureate options which either cross or combine traditional boundaries. These changes are for the most part not structural; the occasional creation of a College of Professional Studies or a School of Environmental Sciences is the exception. The development of such new baccalaureate options typically occurs without major change in formal patterns of academic organization. Yet the change has unmistakably occurred and the significant growth in student interest as well as faculty offerings of this kind seems to me a sadly neglected dimension.

There has also been a welcome increase in the scrutiny of degree programs -- both proposed and existing degree offerings. In part, this scrutiny has been mandated from without (typically by state coordinating boards, commissions and other bodies). But even where external requirements have not been imposed -- as in Wisconsin where we have no coordinating board or commission -- the last decade has seen a commendable and significant increase in commitment to self-regulation by rigorous review of degree programs. While I would grant that less has happened in consequence of these reviews than one

might have supposed -- at least in terms of major surgery -- subtler results have certainly benefited students in various ways.

One might also mention more rigorous admission and graduation requirements which have again resulted more often in the past few years from internal commitment than from external mandate. While raising of entrance and completion standards has been more in process than in substantive terms, it does nonetheless evidence a healthy commitment to that very rigor which the recent reports have found both lacking and necessary.

One other example comes to mind from a quite different quarter. It was just last year that the NCAA Division I finally realized that not only higher admission standards were needed in fairness to intercollegiate athletes but that those who receive grants in aid because of athletic prowess should also be expected to pursue and make reasonable progress toward a coherent baccalaureate major. While the number of students at any given institution affected by this largely unnoticed change in Division I policy may be small, it does strike me as a salutary step in the very direction that recent reports have urged.

Finally, I would suggest that the very willingness to undertake these studies is a healthy sign. In all three cases both the impetus for and membership of the study group came from the academic community itself. Even though the headlines sometimes suggest that higher education has been attacked from without by some alien force, we recognize among the membership of all three commissions some of the most eminent of our own colleagues -- the very people from whom we would expect to receive the most candid appraisal of what is their

record as much as anyone else's. If we had simply waited until someone else sent an inspector, that would be one thing; quite to the contrary, we appointed the inspector ourselves.

Whether or not you find these explanations satisfying -- and I would be more than happy to discuss any of them as time permits -- let me conclude with a few thoughts on how we might respond. First, of course, and preeminently, we ought now to take all three reports, distribute them to our faculties, ask either a curriculum committee or a special group convened for this purpose to review the findings and recommendations over the summer and to bring back to our colleagues in the fall some careful analysis with recommendations that fit each of our institutional situations.

Second, we ought not simply to rediscover the past because it was more rigorous or more familiar or for other reasons that may more clearly reflect nostalgia than logic. The central challenge of these reports, I think, is to go forward -- conscious of the path we have traveled and perhaps willing to retrace certain steps -- but not simply to reclaim a rigor which once existed. (Incidentally, my own sense as one who has been a university professor for 28 years is that the good old days were not as good as sometimes supposed; requirements were not as rigorous nor expectations as high as our wishful retrospection sometimes makes them.)

Third, let me suggest a few options within the control of faculties that wish to achieve better balance between undergraduate liberal and professional studies. One, of course, is to require within the professional field the minimum portion of course work permitted by the accreditors (in business, for example, the

permissible range is from 40% to 60%, with most business schools settling around 50%). Another is to require that a certain portion of the non-professional studies to be taken in unrelated fields -- forcing engineering undergraduates, for example, to take more non-science courses than the core curriculum requires. A third and, to me, most appealing alternative is to insist that every professional baccalaureate student have a co-major or coherent minor in some arts and sciences field. (I would also envision the reciprocal -- a professional minor for most arts and sciences students -- but that is for another time). Surely such an approach fits the professional degree requirements in virtually all cases. Students already take the requisite number of arts and sciences courses, though seldom in a coherent enough sequence to constitute a major. Better and more systematic advising is needed, both on the professional and the arts and sciences side -- but if the commitment of faculty exists, then advising should follow.

Let me offer two other suggestions. There would be much value in a program of freshman seminars, especially for students who come to college intending a rather specific professional or career-oriented curriculum. If every student who enters in a specialized major, for example, were exposed to a seminar with a senior faculty member from a distant discipline, only a few would be deterred from their intended major. Many others would, however, bring to the professional program a richer understanding of its context and would take away from the baccalaureate experience a broader appreciation of values and principles.

More cautiously, I would suggest consideration of a general examination to be given to all undergraduate students in the senior year. The content would be quite general, and could surely reflect differences among specialized curricula. Emphasis might be placed, for example, on ethical issues arising in the profession the student intends to enter. Facility in either oral or written expression (or both) could be tested in this way before graduation. We expect these qualities of our students (and I believe most of our students possess them), but we have no way of assuring ourselves or others in the absence of some rite of passage such as a general examination.

These suggestions are in no way intended to preempt or divert the focus of the recent Commission reports; indeed, I have viewed them as complementary and compatible. There is much more to be said on the subject -- and even more to be done. This is the kind of forum in which we can most usefully compare notes and begin to address the substantial challenges that do await us. I hope our discussion this afternoon will enhance that prospect.

With these general premises and assumptions in mind, I thought a few specific suggestions might be helpful to guide future research initiatives. In each of the areas I suspect substantially more data exists than are obvious to me; perhaps therefore what I am indicating here is as much the extent of my own knowledge (or lack of it) as the actual information base. Nonetheless, let me offer (in no particular order) these random suggestions for future research directions:

(1) It would be useful to have additional means of measuring the impact of various curricula (and curriculum choices) upon students during their undergraduate years.

(2) A study of factors which affect student choices among majors (both initial choice and later changes) would be extremely helpful.

(3) More might be known regarding the satisfaction of students with their curricular choices -- perhaps 5, 10 and even 25 years following graduation.

(4) It would be most useful to have more detailed information on the actual content (and coherence) of courses actually taken by baccalaureate students outside their field of concentration. (Earlier I suggested that such courses typically lacked the coherence expected of a non-professional major but might easily acquire it; that premise certainly deserves to be tested.)

(5) I for one would like to know what happens to intending professional baccalaureate majors when they are turned away from or closed out by limits on professional program enrollments; do they remain at the same institution and pursue other programs or do they shift to other institutions at which the intended professional major is available?

(6) More might be known about the different effects upon student choices of entry into a single comprehensive or general college on the one hand versus entry on the other hand directly into baccalaureate majors.

(7) More might be known about the effects upon student choices and experience of early academic advising and counseling.

(8) I would be particularly interested in a comparison between what students as freshmen indicate they plan to study (not only in general concentration terms but also in terms of particular courses) and what they actually do in fact study.

(9) Finally, it would be most helpful to pursue more intensively the actual effect of accrediting requirements on the professional component of the baccalaureate major; to what extent are heavy professional obligations in fact imposed by accrediting requirements -- or to what extent are specialized agency requirements simply used as rationale for what are in fact self-generated constraints?

These and many other questions might usefully be pursued in light of the current studies of the curriculum. Surely when we return to these issues a decade or so hence we will not only be better informed about student and faculty choices but we will also have a much clearer focus than was the case a decade ago.